A Special Venue: Le Château at 100

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My remarks have to do with the Château not as structure but as context or – to keep things French – as venue. (Even though the French don't use *venue* in that sense.) My colleague Nancy O'Connor has been most helpful in putting this together. And I would like to dedicate these remarks to Glenn Andres, who can't be here today but whose hard work has brought us a new understanding of the Château and indeed insured the life of the Salon Louis XVI.

For the first half of its existence to date –the *Ancien Régime*? -- the Château was unique on campus: A home to about 50 women; a dining room with a live-in chef and language tables whose student waiters spoke the language; a French housemother, the legendary Léa Binand, who served for 27 years; a gamut of in-house activities; several large teaching spaces; a large *grand salon* with copies of period furnishings; the spectacular Salon Louis XVI; and the office of the star faculty member, Claude Bourcier. As pictures in the Davis Library exhibition demonstrate, there were also athletic teams and playing fields.

Everyone living there spoke only French, creating a special community. As a friend recalled recently, "We could go to breakfast in our PJ's."

Imagine as well the original effect, and again with reference to the library exhibit: to the east, north and west, French windows looked out on woods and orchards and fields, and to the south, a greensward ran all the way to Route 125. No Coffrin, no Atwater, no Allen, no Wright, no Johnson, no Battell, no new Battell.

In the 1960'S the College was recasting its curriculum and faculty under the influence of its new president, James Armstrong, and 1969 was the year for French and Spanish. The French department had comprised native speakers, with only one exception, and as I mentioned had its own star professor, Claude Bourcier, a brilliant teacher, lecturer, actor/stage director, choir director, and general distinguished and inspiring presence for students. Very much in the mold of other legendary faculty figures of the era, like "Doc" Cook in English, Pardon Tillinghast in History and Ben Wissler in Physics. Claude left in 1969, to become director of the School in France.

Now came five new faculty members, three of whom were American. It was a difficult transition for juniors and seniors, but we were stunned to find so many students so proficient in French and highly motivated to learn more. I could not believe our great fortune.

Full of the energy – and the political self-satisfaction – of the 1960's, we quickly decided the Château should be coed, and the change came the next year in 1970. I'm confident it was the first coed dorm on campus. I'm also confident that going coed was probably the first in a series of changes from within and without, some inevitable and others sought out, which led to the very different setup of today.

Until then, French majors had been required to spend at least one year in the Château, and relatively few studied abroad. Until the early 70's the College's Schools Abroad in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Soviet Union had been for graduate students only. The College then decided to add an undergraduate component, first in Spain and then in France, with the first group arriving in Paris in 1974.

During these same years, a general downward trend in French enrollments was occurring across the country. Middlebury came to it more slowly than most but was affected by it in the end. We had fewer majors and many we did have were double majors, and their allegiance was often stronger to the other major. Moreover, Middlebury was offering more languages, and the temptation to do a little French and then start another language was quite strong in some students.

It's my sense that making the Château coed made it less attractive to many women, and that the existence of a Middlebury option in Paris further diminished interest in the Château, especially since while we felt that for financial reasons we could not require study in Paris, we had also done away with the Château residence requirement for majors. (Remember, we were decidedly creatures of the 60's.)

Other trends and decisions further affected the Château's special status. In the 80's the language tables were moved to Freeman and in the 90's the College took out the kitchen. (Beloved chef Sam had passed away in the early 70s, and his basement apartment had been converted to faculty offices.) The dining room was later turned into a small theater space and when the Salon Louis XVI was closed because of damage in the 70's and then removed for preservation in the 90's, the space became a "smart" classroom. One can only assume the students greatly missed the space, since it had also been known among them as the "Salon Louis Sex" (not Seize), a convenient space for meeting male friends, who were not allowed in rooms upstairs.

In the early 90's the College renovated the student rooms. Frankly, I think that as a department we were asleep at the switch on this one, as the Château had many small doubles, and we should have called for a better arrangement; instead, we just got . . . renovated small doubles,

hardly a selling point when other dorms were being renovated in more congenial ways. Moreover, the Château Director/Directress's influence was diluted when that apartment was converted to a student triple.

As I think about it, the writing was literally on the wall. When the College put name signs on all its buildings - in the 1980's, I think - "Le Château" was missing its circumflex accent. A harbinger of a new set of priorities?

By this time, for all the reasons I've mentioned, we did not have a large enough cohort of students to fill the Château and speak only French. Around 2000 a shift was therefore made, relocatIng the community to the current French House on Franklin Street for a better fit. A final renovation in 2004 brought the French Department office back in from Sunderland, faculty offices were moved out of the basement into the old director's apartment, and new classrooms were created out of the old kitchen and the basement offices. (I'm still learning to call the basement the "lower level".)

During the French School operation in the summer, the majority of French faculty lived in the Château, with the director occupying the suite. One of the large classrooms featured an actual French bookstore, which disappeared in the mid-1970's. The dining room became the French School faculty lounge, with folks delighted to have such a kitchen at their disposal while it lasted.

Summer faculty teach intensively and every day, and have no offices. They take their meals with students in the dining halls. They live in the dorms, sleep in student beds and share bathrooms. (I'll omit the

anecdotes about the thin walls, those shared bathrooms, and Sorbonne professors surprised in their pajamas.)

Full-pane French windows don't of course admit of American air conditioners, and my son Olivier, who worked at the French School, has asked me to remind that he spent the absolute hottest summer of his life looking south from the third floor.

All of this made the basement lounge a welcome respite from summer heat. In the early 20-aughts, however -- or perhaps before? -- the College decreed there could be no alcohol in dormitories, and so the faculty lounge was moved off campus.

Since we're in a centenary mode, I'll recall that in 1989 for the 200th anniversary of the French revolution, French School historian Michel Launay wittily presided over a *son et lumière* pastiche, and memorably informed us that when the Château was built the construction work began with the windows on the third floor. (Think about it.) The parody then turned to reenactment, as on July 14 faculty and students "stormed" the Château singing revolutionary songs, in memory of the taking of the Bastille.

The Bastille is gone but the Château is still with us. A witness to a mix of trends in higher education and at the same time a monument to Middlebury's historic role in language studies. From the nation's first bespoke French house to a structure still elegant, and surely one of the most distinctive academic buildings in New England, but one that has frankly lost its pride of place on the campus, most recently in the shadow of the new Battell.

The Château also lost a dorm for women; a relatively elegant dining option; a summer French bookstore and faculty lounge. The Salon Louis XVI was removed from its Château venue (but is currently on spectacular display in the museum!). And most of all, the Château lost its band of avid francophones.

Over the same period, the College gained greater flexibility in assigning rooms; more and smarter classrooms; broader study options, first in France and then in Africa, and including francophone studies;

offices worthy of the name for French faculty and department; greater financial flexibility by closing the Château kitchen; and a small theater space.

The Château spirit endures, with French classes and faculty offices throughout a building unlike any other on campus, and a still lively *maison française* now relocated on Franklin Street..

Overall, a bittersweet narrative, as so often in the life of any institution.

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